

SPECIAL REPORT



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Musavi with Shiite militiamen in Baalbek: 'I bow before the souls of the martyrs'

How to Strike Back?

The evidence suggests that Iranian-backed fanatics carried out the attack, but retaliation will be difficult.

Those who directed this atrocity must be dealt justice, and they will be," Ronald Reagan swore last week, but there was a problem: the United States still lacked hard evidence on just who carried out the truck-bomb attack in Beirut. At best, the administration had a strong circumstantial case suggesting an Iranian—and possibly Syrian—connection in the simultaneous assaults against the Marines and French peacekeepers. In particular, U.S. and French intelligence analysts focused their investigation on a small group of Shiite Muslim extremists with close ties to Iranian militants in Baalbek, in eastern Lebanon.

The thirst for vengeance was palpable. At the White House, the Pentagon and State Department, officials were considering a number of possible retaliatory measures, including a surgical air strike against the Muslim extremists in Baalbek and retaliation "in kind" by counterterrorist hit teams. But any method of retaliation carried risks. Some administration officials feared that an air strike could cause civilian casualties—and an anti-American outcry. U.S. intelligence agents have pinpointed an

Iranian military headquarters in the Syrian village of Zebdani, near the Lebanese border. But even if Iranian officers were involved in the attack on the Marines, an air strike against their outpost in Syrian territory could have major international repercussions. Antiterrorist operations—"having a building collapse mysteriously in the middle of the night," as one official put it—would carry a clear message to the other side while avoiding a conspicuous use of U.S. military might. But if Washington retaliated before positively identifying the perpetrators and ordered a counterblow that killed the wrong people, the resulting political furor would further damage U.S. interests in the area.

Prime Suspect: Some intelligence sources consider Hussein Musavi—a 40-year-old former teacher who heads a pro-Iranian organization called Islamic Amal—to be a prime suspect in the bombing. Musavi and his small band of fundamentalist followers split off two years ago from Amal, the main militia group of Lebanon's Shiite Muslims. Musavi set up his headquarters in Baalbek, 50 miles east of Beirut, where he established

close links with some 350 Iranian Revolutionary Guards who came to Lebanon in 1982 as volunteers in the war against Israel. One intelligence source suggested that Musavi may have supplied the suicide driver. Musavi denied any role in the bombings, but he said: "I bow before the souls of the martyrs who carried out this operation."

The fact that the operation was a suicidal mission strongly suggested Iranian influence. The airport attack and the car bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Beirut last April were starkly reminiscent of the yearning for martyrdom displayed by Iranians in the war against Iraq. Furthermore, American and French troops were the targets in last week's kamikaze raids, while Italian and British members of the multinational peacekeeping force were not. Iran considers America the "Great Satan." And it denounces France as "demonic" for having pledged to supply Iraq with Super Etendard jets capable of firing Exocet missiles.

No Trace: Two organizations—Islamic Jihad and Free Islamic Revolutionary Movement—claimed they had carried out the bombing attacks, though intelligence officials were not convinced. Whoever they were, the Marines' attackers covered their tracks. "This operation was carried out by maybe five, six or seven people, entirely in Beirut, with only two or three people who knew the target," said a Washington intelligence source. Investigators at the sites of the two bombings were frustrated. The explosions were so powerful that they left no trace of the drivers and destroyed all but a few small shreds of the suicide vehicles. Many of the witnesses are dead or severely injured. "This may have been the perfect crime," said Lt. Col. Hisham Jaaber, a Lebanese Army liaison officer with the Marine peacekeeping contingent. "There is no evidence."

Syria's possible role in the bombings of the American and French peacekeepers may largely have been a matter of looking the other way. Insofar as the bombings were intended to drive the peacekeepers out of Lebanon and to humiliate the United States, the attack served Syria's interests. American and Israeli intelligence sources note that Baalbek and its environs are under Syrian Army control, and that both Musavi's Islamic Amal militants and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards maintain close contacts with Syrian intelligence headquarters in the Bekaa Valley. Some sources believed that the trucks packed with TNT must have made their way to Beirut over roads that are under Syrian control. Syria may not have organized or supervised the assault—the view of U.S. intelligence officials—but that bellicose country may bear ultimate responsibility. If so, Reagan's problem only deepens: what is the appropriate retaliation for a remote-control attack?

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